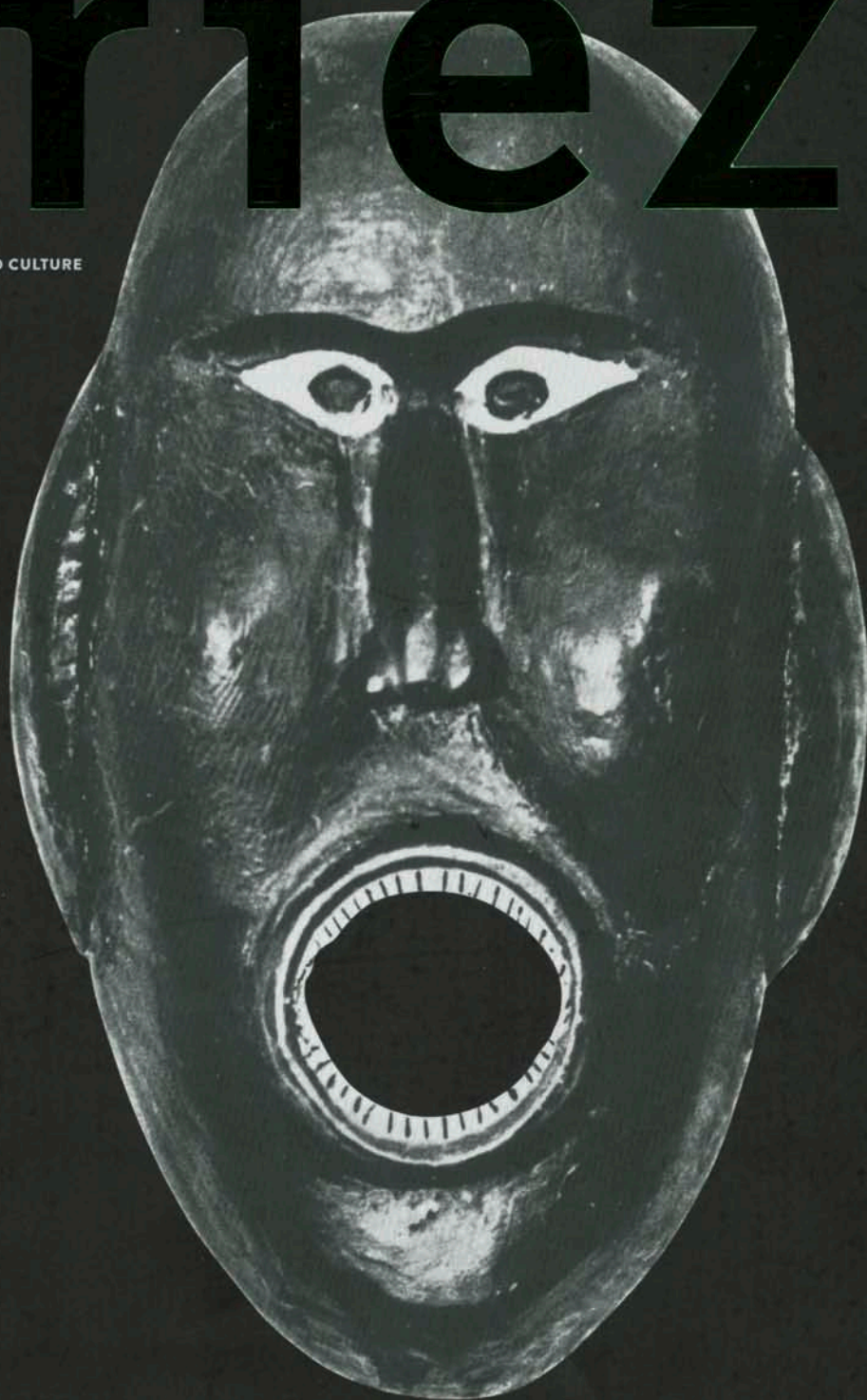


frieze

CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

NO. 150 OCTOBER 2012



JIMMIE DURHAM *Life & Death & Singing*

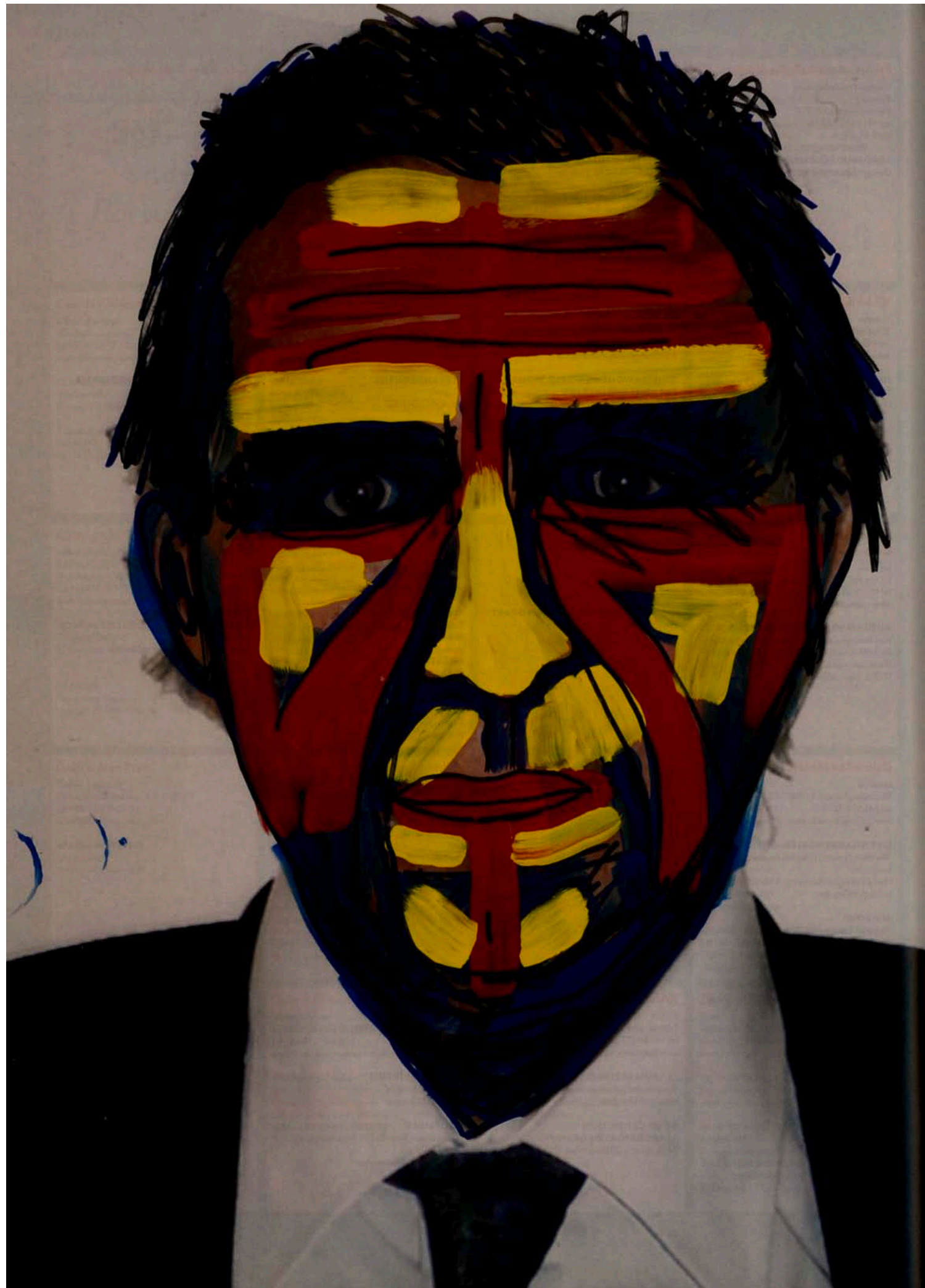
GETA BRĂTESCU *My Influences*

OUTSIDER ART? *A Round Table*

Artist Project by **ROE ETHRIDGE**

UK £5.95 US \$10 €10





Various

Elements

On the occasion of a major retrospective at M HKA in Antwerp, Jimmie Durham talks to *Kirsty Bell* about enthusiasm, itinerancy, cities, poetry and Cherokee mythology

Born in 1940 in Arkansas, USA, Jimmie Durham is an artist, activist and poet living in Europe. He has been involved with the American Indian Movement and served as their representative to the United Nations. He participated in documenta(13) and his retrospective at M HKA, Belgium, is on show until 18 November. His work is included in the Taipei Biennial until 13 January 2012, and a solo exhibition at Fondazione Morra Greco in Naples, Italy, opens in December. A new volume of his previously unpublished poems, entitled Poems That Do Not Go Together – five of which are exclusively reproduced here – is published by Wiens Verlag, Berlin, and Edition Hansjörg Mayer, London.

A Pole to Mark the Center of the World in Berlin, 2004, wooden stick, mirror, 83 x 61 cm

It is a sunny Saturday afternoon in Antwerp, five days before the opening of Jimmie Durham's retrospective exhibition 'A Matter of Life and Death and Singing' at M HKA. Most of the 120 plus works in the show – dating from the early 1980s to the present – have been unpacked but not yet installed. Even so, it is thrilling to see these eclectic pieces assembled and up close: animal skulls with psychedelic patterning; car parts configured to approximate romantically stereotypical American Indian artefacts; extraordinary blocks of petrified wood; oil cans brightly painted with stencilled text forming a kind of installation-as-poetry; industrial PVC pipes from which a peeking face emerges.

I find Durham in the workshop tucked away beyond the ground floor exhibition rooms. As we speak, he is fixing part of a sculpture from the installation *Pocahontas and the Little Carpenter in London*, which was originally shown at Matt's Gallery, London, in 1987. It is a snake, about a metre long, with painted tail and head, accessorized with wooden beads and a little jingling bell on its tail. He had cut

it in half in order to fit it in his suitcase to bring to London. Holding half of the snake in one hand, the artist uses a small wood-handled knife to pick away at the dried-up glue left over from a mangled repair job undertaken by unknown hands at some time in the past. Later, when playing back the recording of the interview, I can hear the chip, chip, chip of the knife, while power saws, drills and staple machines from elsewhere in the workshop can also be heard in the background. Despite these aural distractions, Durham's voice comes through, clear, slow-paced and resonant. Each word is measured, considered and well-aimed. The seriousness of his words is softened, however, by intermittent chuckling and light, agile wit; a good cop/bad cop combination which also goes to animate his politically oriented and highly engaging sculptures, writings, videos and performances. The artist spent the 1970s as a political organizer for the American Indian Movement, working for recognition of the rights of his people and against their ongoing colonial oppression, which deprived them not only of land, but also of cultural values. The predicament of his own and other indigenous peoples has informed his artistic production since, in a rigorous, if playful, unpicking of assumed cultural, social and political cornerstones: architecture, religion and nationality.

KIRSTY BELL

How do you feel about the prospect of this retrospective exhibition, which includes works that you probably haven't seen for 30 years or so?

JIMMIE DURHAM

All my works stay in my mind, so I'm neither pleased nor displeased to see them again. For me, it's about the practicalities, as I have to repair all the damaged works. I just think: 'Why wasn't this ever polished?' or 'Why was this sawn in two?'



1
A Staff To Mark The Center Of The World,
2004, wooden sticks, keyrings
and artist's handwritten notes,
each: 200 x 10 x 10 cm

2
Odds and Ends, 2011,
wood, bones, seashells, glass and tissue,
55 x 60 x 75 cm

3
Que Linda Esta la Mañana („How beautiful is
the morning“) („The little birds are singing“,
„the moon is growing“), 2010, acrylic paint on
deerskin, 66 x 25 cm

4
La Malinche, 1988-91,
wood, cotton, snakeskin, watercolour,
polyester and metal,
168 x 56 x 84 cm

'People still ask where Noah's Ark was or whether the forbidden fruit was an apple or a fig. Oh, shut up! There wasn't any! It's just a story.'

KB In your essay for the catalogue, you talk about work being generative – is this exhibition another example of work generating work?

JD What I meant was that it doesn't necessarily lead to intelligent work; in fact, it can often lead to stupid work. That's a general problem of enthusiasm. You think you're being smart when you're being very dumb. When I'm very enthusiastic about something, I'm usually very foolish.

KB So you try and control the exhilaration?

JD Yes, but I don't know how to. I'm including a piece here at M HKA that I made for an exhibition in Oxford [*Various Elements from the Actual World*, shown in 'Transmission Interrupted', Modern Art Oxford, 2009], which I haven't shown since. Everyone who has seen images of it has remained completely silent about it, apart from Anders Kreuger [the exhibition's curator] who said: 'I wouldn't put this in the show if I were you.'

KB So you took that as a good sign?

JD Yes! It was one of those labour-intensive works where you paint and sculpt and glue and all of that, and I like the nonsense of it. It was such enthusiastic fun making it. Day after day of doing things – it was such a long process – and I hadn't seen it since that show in Oxford, until yesterday.

KB And?

JD And I like it very much!

KB On the *DOCUMENTA* (13) website, where all of the 'participants' are categorized, you are the only one listed as an artist, writer and activist. Was there ever a time when you felt like just concentrating on your writing and not making the sculptures, or vice versa?

JD It happens very often. I would like now to take a year or maybe even two years off from art-making and write: there are two books I want to write. And, I would also like to take two years off to go to Brazil and work with old tropical wood, and not do it for any reason except the love of doing it. And I would like to get myself a new studio in Naples and spend a year just doing work there. So, I am never satisfied. But I do have a new book of poems coming out, which I am very pleased about.

KB Some months ago, you gave a very engaging lecture as part of a conference about art in the public realm, in which you talked about what you called the 'man-on-horseness' of public art in Europe, amongst many other things. You also discussed Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981), and how you and your partner, Maria Thereza Alves, were the only artists amongst those who opposed it. Your own approach to making art in the public space – the African Mahogany tree trunk laid out in a sculpture park in Cologne [*Pagliaccio non son*, 2011], for instance – gestures against this kind of monumentalism.

JD I think public art is always a strange idea, as I said at that conference. To put something in the public sphere as art that stays there every day is invasive, it's stupid and it's only public in the sense that it's against the public – that the public have been suckered and sold something. When I was in London several years ago, they were running a programme called 'Poems on the Underground' [1986–ongoing], in which beautiful poems featured on the tube. That's public poetry, but it is not someone on the street corner blasting poetry through a loud speaker, is it? You don't have to read it. On the other hand, you must walk around the Serra piece. You must be oppressed by bad sculpture that sticks out there for ever and ever.

KB So, the tree you placed in the park in Cologne is the least invasive form of public art?

JD Yes, but there are a lot of public art criminals around it.

KB In 1980 you stopped working as a political activist and began to concentrate on your work as an artist and writer. Although I don't necessarily see a complete disconnect between one and the other, aren't the audiences somewhat different?

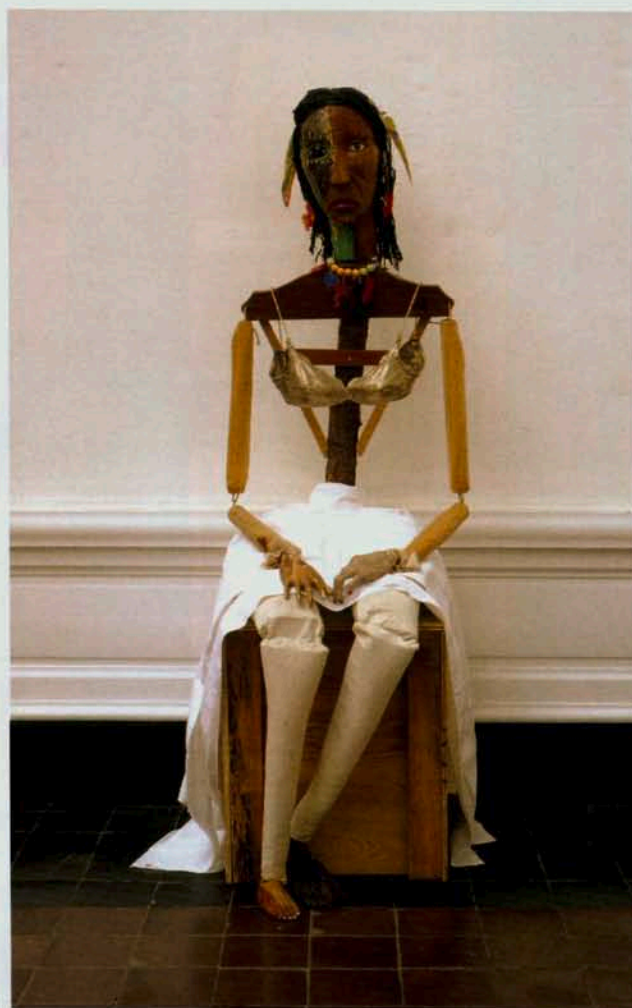
JD I am trying to be an activist again, in a certain way, but just with words. And I'm trying to do the opposite of what I did in the 1970s when I was our UN representative, for Indians of the Americas.

We were the umbrella group for many organizations, including the Shuar Confederation of Ecuador and the Mapuche Confederation of Chile, amongst others. We have specific histories of invasion and colonization by Europe, and in every case in the Americas the invasion is celebrated and the colonization is denied. We wanted to force the international community to look at that exact situation. I constantly got letters, at least once a month, from Sami people in Scandinavia, from Ainu people in Japan, from the Bontoc people in the Philippines, and from a whole host of indigenous peoples from outside the Americas who have no representation. And I ignored the letters.

KB Because you had enough to contend with dealing with the Americas?

JD Yes, and because I didn't want our focus to be diluted to the plight of indigenous people worldwide, because then it gets romantic. But, in the end, all we could get approved by the UN was a permanent commission and a declaration of the rights of indigenous people worldwide.

We couldn't do anything about the Americas specifically. So, we took what we could get. But maybe I was wrong, and now I want to be an activist from the point of view of indigenous peoples the world over. It's a question of re-seeing. If I look at the world from the perspective of all indigenous people, what is the common denominator between us? Not that we are indigenous, not that we are closer to nature – none of these sentimental things. But the fact that we are stateless peoples. And we will always be stateless peoples. We cannot have an Israel.





The Dangers of Petrification, 1998–2007,
stones; two knives, five ceramic
plates, three wooden chopping boards and
hand written papers, 100 × 200 × 75 cm



PETRIFIED ROAD

PETRI-FICATION

ESS OF PETRI-FICATION, AS IN THE VERBOUSNESS, TIMES STONE, OCCURS NATURALLY WHEN, OVER MILLIONS OF YEARS, IN AQUEOUS SOLUTION REPLACE THE ORIGINAL FORM. PETRI-FICATION IS MOST USUALLY FORMED IN SAND, IN THE "PETRI-FIED FOREST" IN ARIZONA. IT APPEARS, GIVEN THE PROPER CONDITIONS AND TIME, CAN TURN TO STONE.

THE WORK OF WALTER BENJAMIN

A PETRI-FIED CLOUD



ONE OF THE MORE STRANGE PHENOMENA OF CONTEMPORARY WEATHER, WHEN CERTAIN LAYEREDS OF TURBULENT AIR MIX WITH HIGHLY MINERALISED SEA WATER AT THE SURFACE OF THE OCEAN, WINDS LIKE AND WARM WATER MAKE MORE TURBULENCE, CLOUDS BECOME SUPER-SATURATED AND MINERALISED.

THE WORK OF WALTER BENJAMIN



PETRIFIED SUGAR

We cannot even have a Kurdish state much less a Bontoc state, a South African Bushmen Pygmy state, a Sami state or any other state.

KB So, what's your perspective on the future?

JD This is my activist role. Because what I wanted at the UN I still want: I want total victory, total defeat of my enemy. How do I achieve this total victory? The states have to go away. I want us indigenous people to be recognized in the world because there is a world government to recognize us. And this would not be the United Nations; this would be the United People Against Nations. It has to be the end of white people. How do you achieve the end of white people? Get rid of the nations. Black people don't call themselves black people, Kenyans don't call themselves black people; it's only the people from European nations who have this concept that they are white people. If they didn't have their nations, they'd lose their whiteness at the same time. They have to join the human race.

KB Is writing the medium you intend to use in your reprisal of activism?

JD Yes, writing and public speaking. I hope it will be more than talk, but I don't know what form the 'more than talk' would take. The nicest thing about this agenda is that it's about people developing a new mindset. It won't have anything to do with the old forms of political activity – what we used to call the 'armed struggle', those kinds of things.

KB That's the hardest part: finding a vocabulary that stops people from slipping back into familiar old arguments. Another problem, which was highlighted at this year's Berlin Biennale, is the misunderstanding that art is merely a vessel for politics, the disbelief that art can be intrinsically political. You talk about art being an intellectual activity that is not dependent on language, one that is beyond language. It seems essential to believe that if you want to work with art's political potential.

JD I have to believe that I can do art daily – quotidianly, as intellectuals would say – only if I can do it from an intellectual point of view, otherwise I wouldn't have the courage. If I were making art as a business, I wouldn't have the courage to continue.

KB You left America in 1987, moving first to Cuernavaca in Mexico, and since 1994 you have lived in various European cities, now dividing your time between Berlin and Naples. You describe yourself as being a citizen of Eurasia. This mobile sense of place comes through in your work, and is particularly well articulated by your series 'Poles to Mark the Centre of the World' [1995–ongoing], in which wooden poles are variously adorned and installed in locations you have visited and worked in – from Yakutsk, Russia, to Gwangju, Korea.

JD I started out with the idea that Eurasia would have seven centres of the world because Cherokee mythology states that there are 'seven directions', and I thought I would make a pole for each direction. The seven key directions we believe in are: up, down, north, south, east, west and inside yourself. There are many more, however:



north by northwest, south by southeast and so on – an infinite number of directions. And within myself I'm rather contradictory – as most people are – and I do not follow a single direction. So, the poles became a series, and I've now made about ten of them. I started counting them, but then I said to myself: since the number of directions is infinite, why am I counting them?

KB *If your starting point is always one of exile, of landlessness, then the idea that any place where you happen to be may be designated the centre of the world becomes a rather beautiful concept. In your writings, networks of cooperation also come across as an important way to locate yourself in the world; the various people you have worked with who have become anchors in some way...*

JD Yes, I like that about my life very much. I feel especially lucky to have had so many patient lovers over the years, who have taught me things, and been kind and generous. But also just friends in general.

KB *Over the years, you have produced many books of essays, poetry and drawings. One of my favourites is called Nature in the City [2001], a diary-like book whose anecdotal entries record a year you spent observing evidence of nature in Berlin.*

JD We try to deny nature, we desperately want to live in a city away from nature, yet we still catch colds; nature is ever-present. It's interesting to consider how people do things now – in what is, I suppose, the computer age – compared to earlier generations. I can do many things manually, I have a lot of skills: I can carve, I can hammer, I can weld. But I cannot even do a tenth of what my father could: he could do everything. And the young artists who are my students can do nothing with raw physical material: they don't understand its properties, and they don't know how to work with it. This is not necessarily a negative thing in itself, but what is negative is what goes along with it: that you don't know the world you live in, you're not conscious of it, so as it is being manipulated, you are being manipulated against nature, against yourself, by commercial interests.

KB *Your sculpture works against this very clearly, in a political way, prompting questions such as: Is the city nature? Are humans nature? Is a nation natural? Works like St. Frigo [1996], in which you threw cobblestones at an old American-style fridge every morning for ten*

'We try to deny nature, we desperately want to live in a city away from nature, but we still catch colds; nature is ever-present.'

days, or The Museum of Stones [2012], which attempts to remove stone from its menial role in architecture and return it to its status as an independent sculptural form, in Anselm Franke's touring exhibition 'Animism' [2010–12], led viewers to become more aware of the world they live in, in simple material terms as much as socio-political ones.

JD I wouldn't live anywhere but a city, and I like big cities. I like the combination of anonymity and the opportunity for social interaction at the same time. In a village, social interaction is always too close, too intimate, too intrusive. Neighbours spying on neighbours. But you can look at the planet from a distance and see that our instinctive way of being human is to make cities: we do it everywhere. It's completely natural. And it seems just as natural that we like to have power over each other, and to manipulate each other, and to fuck each other around. Yet, we also have sufficient intellect to tell ourselves that's not a nice way to be, we shouldn't be doing that. That, to me, is the politics of art: to be intellectually engaged.

KB *Do you see intellectual engagement as a form of resistance?*

JD Absolutely. Not from the point of view of consciously making an art of resistance, but just by resisting, by trying to be positive and productive.

KB *This resistance seems to come from the decision to look at what's coming up through the cracks. For example, the way you work with language often involves a double take – not necessarily accepting the word as a transparent entity, but taking one step back to see where it comes from.*

JD Yes, exactly. I can't imagine not wanting to do that. I can't imagine the desire to ignore.

KB *This also seems to be a way of thinking about origin – as something that is almost opposite to history. The origin is there at all times; it's not about going backwards.*

JD Quite right. In Italy I'll say: I looked up my family tree and I'm a direct descendent of the very first human beings in the world. And then someone will usually say: you mean Adam and Eve? I don't know their names! We still have in our global society so many stupid religious beliefs that come out constantly and don't get challenged. There must be a dozen science-fiction films where two people are the sole survivors left on earth, and they are supposed to be going to make a new future. You cannot do that! We know that's not true of other species either: we know that one pair of elephants is not going to save the elephant race!

KB *Despite Noah!*

JD Exactly! People still ask where Noah's Ark was or whether the forbidden fruit was an apple or a fig. Oh, shut up! There wasn't any! It's just a story.

KB *The strategy of interruption, of the double take, appears in your work in many different forms: the personal interjections in your writing; the combination of materials in your sculptures; how you introduce text in your art objects or drawings.*

JD Generally, when I listen to a lecture by an intellectual or when I read a book by a philosopher, I know within the first few paragraphs what the line of thought is, and that the book is basically going to continue along with this same line of thought. And it's as if you already know that line of thought. Sometimes, when [my partner] Maria Thereza and I watch movies at home when we're tired, she'll ask me: 'What did they just say?' And I'll reply: 'I don't know, I wasn't listening, I was just watching.' Because you don't need to know what they're saying, you can just follow the action. It would only be a problem if they said or did something strange, which they never do. It's really a delight to me when something unexpected happens. It gives me courage for some reason. It might be just the way my mind works. It was definitely always intrinsic to my nature, although it's also something I've tried deliberately to develop because I don't agree with linearity, with always leading to a point. Some years ago, I tried to give a lecture without a point to a nice art audience in Vienna. I thought I had a lot of interesting things to say. But, sure enough, the complaint from several people was: 'I didn't see the point of your lecture.'

KB *Then it was successful!*

JD It was successful, yes! ☘

Kirsty Bell is a contributing editor of frieze based in Berlin, Germany.



2



3



FRIEZE VIDEO

Jimmie Durham reads a selection of his previously unpublished poetry on frieze.com

1

Pissing in Germany (detail), 2012, installation view, Galerie Barbara Wein, Berlin

2

Stone Top (nest), 2003, car and shale, installation view, Jølster, Norway

3

St. Frigo, 1996, production still and installation view, FRAC Champagne-Ardenne, Rheims, 1996

HE WILL NOT HAVE BEEN ENOUGH

Hello animals of north america.
 Hello coyote, pumas, chipmunks.
 There is nothing I can have done.
 I will have been unable
 To block the animated cartoons.
 Hello dead friends everywhere.
 Hello almost forgotten, gone friends.
 Will you have been willing
 To smile again at my memory?
 My words will not have kept you.
 Good bye enemies! Hale and hearty!
 Strong, willing cheerful, full
 Of stamina enemies!
 I have no sticks nor stones;
 My words will never harm your bones.
 (O stones and rough sticks! Fix me up!
 I'm sorry to have brought you into this!)

A THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Pigs like beer.
 I read in the newspaper.
 Pigs like beer.
 No reason not, but
 How much should they get?
 And, do they get rowdy,
 Or sick like Englishmen?
 Should beer for the younger
 Pigs be rationed? Forbidden?
 How might I stop these thoughts?

SNACK BAR VARIATIONS

Sneak Bear
 Snuck Boar
 Snake Bare
 Snock Beer
 Snook Burr
 Snick Boor
 Snike Byre
 Snuck Burr
 Sneak Bare
 Snake Beer
 Snook Boor
 Snack Bore
 Snack Beer
 Snack Bare
 Smack Bar
 Smack Bare
 Smack Bear
 Smack Boar
 Slack Bear
 Slack Beer
 Slack Boor
 Back Snar
 Back Snore
 Black Snare
 Black Smear
 Black Sneer
 Or Perhaps
 Bacr Snak

THE WEDDING • JULY 1, 2002

I was not invited to the wedding but did not attend.
 There were dates, most likely, dried apricots
 And little cakes.
 The bride was blown to bloody bits.
 Not being there, I was worse than innocent;
 No bystander. The radio told me about it.
 North of Kabul, the younger sister of the bride,
 Yes, the younger sister was squashed down
 Into the bloody sand.
 So was her mother and the groom (Boom! No more room!)
 'The people of Afghanistan are prepared to make sacrifices.'
 Pieces of dirty metal entered the groom's right hand,
 And rudely entered his neck, and the groom's chest
 And his stomach, legs, head, and feet; flying so
 Quickly he was dead before he heard the sound.
 I was far away, almost everyone who did not attend
 The wedding was far away and as I write
 Distance ourselves, become more far away.

Berlin

LEFT FOR DEAD

Like a dead Comanche' pony
 It bites the dust.
 Its dry tongue dragging in the sand
 And its eyes staring holes in the sky.
 The sole is torn, worm from miles
 Of work.
 Who places these mateless, forlorn
 Shoes in deserts?
 Who throws single shoes from
 Windows of cars to deserted shoulders
 Of highways?
 In honor of history and its marches let us
 Have a closet museum of dropped and discarded
 Shoes.

Texas, 1966